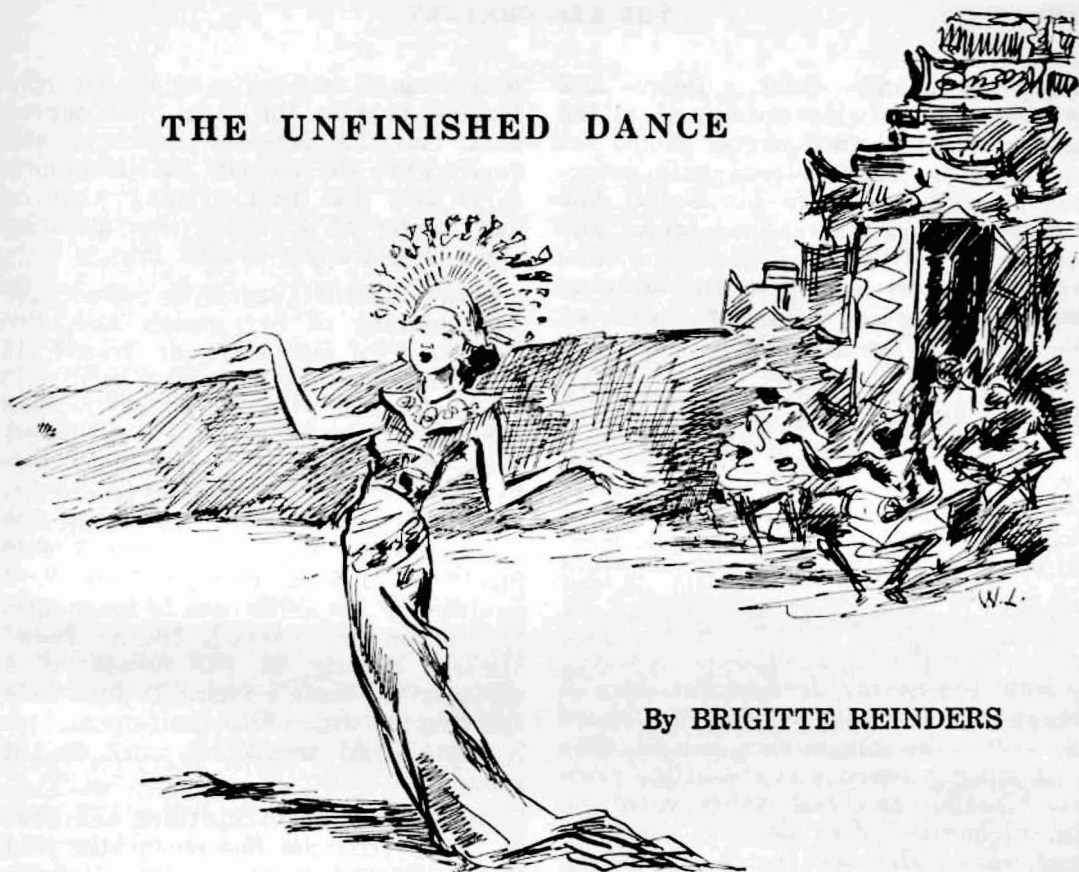


THE UNFINISHED DANCE



By BRIGITTE REINDERS

The papers have lately been full of news from the East Indies. Most of us have been reading more about these islands in the last six weeks than in the whole of our lives before. And we are likely to read still more about them in the near future, for they are now, since the fall of Java, part of the same Co-Prosperity Sphere in which we ourselves are living. But everything recently published about this archipelago consisted of articles dealing with either military or political and economic affairs and was written by men. In this issue two women writers have contributed articles of a different nature: "The Heart of the World," concerning life in Sumatra, and the present story about love on Bali.

In "The Unfinished Dance" the Bali of air raids and naval engagements emerges anew as the isle of enchantment. The author has contributed once before to our magazine ("The Fires of Smeroe," December 1941) and has made a special study of life and customs in the East Indies.—K. M.

THE heat shimmered over the rice fields. The countryside seemed bare of life. The white cranes, which in the early morning had tirelessly followed the plowing oxen, had disappeared into the shade of the trees, and the oxen rolled their heavy bodies in the ponds. There they would lie till the men returned from the village in the cool of the evening, once more to draw the plow through the brown earth before darkness fell. But mean-

while the villagers had fled from the heat into the coolness of the flowing stream or the shade of their huts. A profound midday quiet reigned in the village of Tedjakoele. The street was deserted. The heat seemed to have silenced even the yelping dogs.

The huts with their closed doors stood as lifeless as the coconut palms in the oppressive heat. Only the last in the row, where the road turns off to the temple, showed no sign of noon-

day heat and quiet. Door and windows stood wide open, and in the baking sun the wood carver Komo sat at his work. The colored kain covering his hips stuck to his body. The sweat ran down his naked back. His fine head-cloth had slipped to one side, and the flower which in the morning had smiled gaily behind his ear lay forgotten on the ground.

Komo was so absorbed in his work that he did not even notice the bowl of rice which his brother had put there for him. He saw nothing but the piece of wood in his hands, to which he spoke as if to a living thing. Now and again he sharpened his knife on a stone, the quicker to conjure the little head of his beloved Sissia out of the lifeless wood.

Now the narrow forehead of the girl began to take shape. He was aware of every thought hidden behind that soft dome. There was the little frown of vexation she had worn when he teased her the other day and said that she was really still much too young to become his wife. With swift movements he carved the lovely arch of her eyebrows in the wood. Tenderly his fingers stroked the contours.

Then he looked up from his work and smiled. How should he carve the eyes of his Sissia? She had so many different eyes. Should he make them large and shining? As they had shone the other day when he had told her about the hut he was going to build for her, and about the gold earrings she would wear as his wife. Or should he give them that mischievous expression that he loved so much? But then he saw her suddenly as she had looked when he had spoken of the day on which he would, according to ancient custom, carry her off from her father's house. And with a sure hand he carved two shy, girlish eyes in the wood.

With a satisfied smile he wiped the sweat from his forehead. And now the nose. How she could wrinkle her little nose! And when she put the open coconut to her lips to drink, her

nose seemed as flexible as the tip of a bamboo tree in the wind. He carved it in all its straight delicacy, and finally gave the nostrils that trembling curve they had that evening when he had wanted to draw her into his arms and she had shyly evaded him.

Now his heart began to pound. He was thinking of her mouth, and with the point of his knife he traced its shape in the wood. It was small and virginal, with two dimples in the corners of the closed lips. His heart beat faster while he cut deeper into the wood. His hand worked feverishly. When the girl's mouth was completed he began to carve her round chin under it. But a strange force kept on drawing his knife back to the mouth. He carved and carved, till he found himself looking at the mouth of a stranger in Sissia's face. It was wide and ripe, with full, half-open lips. Aghast, Komo threw his work on the ground.

He jumped up, overturning the bowl of rice, trod heedlessly on the red flower, fetched a new block of wood, and began to work again. For a moment he stared at the wood undecidedly. Then the knife shot across the surface, giving the shapeless block the rough outline of the face, and went straight for the spot where the mouth was to be. Komo breathed hoarsely: this time he must succeed. There it was, the narrow upper lip of his Sissia, with its slightly mocking lift. Was she laughing at him? Then his heart began to thud and his knife to race over the wood again. And again, as in his first attempt, this wide, strange mouth appeared.

With a crash the new work landed in the corner, so that the frightened fighting cocks crowed in their baskets. Komo did not hear them. He was already holding a new piece of wood in his hand. His body was bent over his work, and a deep furrow wrinkled his brow between his eyes. He carved like one possessed.

This time he did not start with the mouth right away. With infinite

tenderness he began to carve blossoms in the hair of the maiden. The little ears he adorned with hanging ornaments. And for a long time he worked away at forehead, nose, and eyes, then at the chin, which emerged from the wood in all its firm roundness. Finally he could hardly bear to leave the slender neck.

Then Komo sat staring at the empty space between nose and chin. When he closed his eyes he could clearly see Sissia's mouth. But as soon as he put his knife to the wood his heart began to race again, and the vision was clouded. And then the mouth was formed that was not Sissia's. Komo was in despair. He, the best carver in the village, unable to carve Sissia's mouth? Had the demons, the Butas, bewitched him?

That was what his brother Gorodjo thought too when, on the following morning, he saw the unfinished carvings in the hut and found Komo, pale and silent, carving away outside the door. Gorodjo received no thanks for the jug of palm wine he had brought him. And his reminder not to forget the daily sacrifice to the Butas seemed to fall on deaf ears. Komo was in a bad state. His fighting cocks had not been fed, and the god of the spring had waited in vain for the word of thanks when Komo came to fetch water, so quickly had he hurried away.

Now he was sitting again at his work as he had done yesterday, struggling with the mouth. He talked silently to himself: his brother was right, he must make a sacrifice this evening to the Butas. It was they who had possessed his hands. His head, too, and his heart. And as he listened to himself, questioning and searching, he knew when it was that he had fallen into the power of the demons.

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It had happened on the day Sissia had danced the part of Devisita, the daughter of the goddess of black magic. The gamelan players had come together as usual, and Komo—like all

true Balinese, not only wood carver, sculptor, and painter—had composed the music to this dance. He had sat at the drum and, led by him, the instruments of the orchestra had blended together.

In the square formed by the gamelan Sissia danced. At first she was shy and restrained as she glided over the ground. Her head rose like a pale flower from the heavy brocade robes that covered her slender body from her shoulders down to her feet, and round it her hands unfolded like the wings of a butterfly. Komo stared spellbound at these hands, hands which had been awakened to the life of the old legend by his music. He saw the girl Sissia gradually turning into the temptress Devisita who had been commanded by her evil goddess-mother to lure the men she had chosen as victims.

As the gamelan grew louder and its rhythm increased, Sissia moved faster and faster over the ground. Her body began to quiver ecstatically, her hands to flutter, her eyes to shine. Only her mouth remained firmly closed, as if it alone were unconscious of the enchantment of Devisita. It alone remained Sissia, and it alone did not change when, the dance over, Devisita turned back into the maiden Sissia who shyly and silently left the place. Komo had stayed behind with the others.

Now, when he was thinking about it, he suddenly remembered exactly how lonely he had really felt after the dance. More than anything he had wanted to hold Sissia's hand, to ask her something, or just to look at her. But custom forbade him to see the girl after the dance, let alone speak to her.

That same afternoon he had gone to the neighboring village, where the music was to be rehearsed for the Joget dance that was to take place on the evening of the approaching temple feast. They had been at it for hours. Half the village had been there, had listened, criticized, and made the usual

jokes as to which of the gamelan players would be the lucky one this time at the wooing dance.

They had something to say about each one: Gorodjo was too short; Atmardidja, who beat the gong, had a crooked back; and Baboeang with his skinny legs would certainly not be chosen by the dancer. Komo, too, was out of the question, for he was far too much in love with Sissia, and at the end of the Joget dance he would not carry off the dancer in his arms into the darkness of the jungle. Perhaps she would pick Soegardjo. He was sure not to say no, the rascal, for his head was always full of girls.

So the people had talked and laughed. And then, at the very end, the dancer had appeared. She had glided round the square formed by the sixteen gamelan players as if she already wanted to choose the man who was to complete the Joget dance with her. She let her body and arms indicate the music for a few bars only.

She had nothing of Sissia's slim grace. Her body was full and mature, and Komo had to think of the bursting fruit of the doerian belanda. In the midst of the music of the gamelan he could taste its ripe sweetness. Then the woman had slipped past him and had smiled at the man beating the gong beside him. As she did so her lips had slowly opened. And he saw a mouth such as he had looked for in vain in Sissia's face during the Devisita dance. Spellbound, his eyes were riveted to the mouth of this woman, till she had left the circle.

And now, sitting here under his tree and struggling over his work, he knew that, since that afternoon, he had been possessed by the demons. They gave him no peace. They had bewitched his thoughts so that he could not help but carve this strange mouth in Sissia's face. First he had thought that the demons were in the wood, and for every new attempt he had taken wood from another tree. Then he thought they had bewitched

his knife, and he had borrowed his neighbor's. But, in spite of everything, each time it was this strange mouth that grew under his hands.

Now that it was evening it was time to prepare the sacrifice for the Butas. He carefully put down some banana leaves with rice in front of the entrance to the hut. Perhaps the demons would find their way out and disappear from his heart. How else was he to face Sissia tomorrow at the temple feast? After he had put out the oil lamp and lain down on his mat to sleep, he thought of the girl. But then his heart began to beat again, and the Butas came, and a sensual mouth swam into his vision. Now all he could think of was the Joget dance that was to take place the next day. And he could not sleep.

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Early morning found him on his way to the temple. He had put on his best kain, and a golden kris covered with jewels adorned his back. His servants carried three of his best fighting cocks. But the brown one, his favorite, he carried himself.

The path led through green rice fields. He passed by the rice temples without heed, and he forgot to acknowledge the holy mountain of the gods. He remained silent to the gay greetings of the girls he passed. Looking to neither right nor left, he walked straight ahead as if driven by the demons. And so he remained all day, benumbed, his gaze fixed.

Like one in a dream he saw the long procession of women, balancing towering piles of sacrificial gifts on their heads, go through the narrow entrance to the temple. He did not hear the oracles uttered by the priestesses in their trance. And when Sissia led the chain of dancers which wound around the temple court like a garland, he crept away. He did not appear again till the gong announced the start of the cock fights. But even there he sat as if unconcerned. And when he did not even show a sign of grief at the loss of his beloved brown cock, his friends shook their heads. But what did they

know of the burning impatience with which Komo awaited the Joget dance, of how he could scarcely bear to wait till he could lead the gamelan?

At last the moment had come. At last the full moon was in the sky. At last the four carved oil lamps were lighted. The people crowded around. Komo beat the drum, and a cascade of sound poured out into the night. It called and lured and threatened and repulsed and called again. And suddenly the dancer was there.

With closed eyes and voluptuous movements she swept along the square of the players. Slowly she moved her full hips, slowly she opened her eyes, and her teeth gleamed between her lips. Komo beat away at the drum. The orchestra answered, as if it understood his longing, his torture, and his joy at seeing the woman dance at last. And the more his music lured, the more her mouth enticed. It called every one of the gamelan players. One man after another, beckoned by the woman's hand, entered the circle and danced the seven prescribed figures of the Joget. In breathless suspense the audience followed the order in which she called the men.

Tirelessly Komo beat the drum, and tirelessly the woman danced. In the pale moonlight her face looked almost unreal, with only her red mouth alive like a scarlet blossom. The low-hanging oil lamps threw their light on the dancing bodies and the squatting players. The people stood around in a circle like a dark wall. Except for Komo there were now only two men left to be chosen. The voice of his drum was raised in urgent desire above the sound of the other instruments. Tense excitement seized the people. Now the woman beckoned Baboeang, and beside Komo there remained only Soegardjo who beat the gong. He would be the last, said the onlookers.

The music became still more passionate, and the movements of the woman heavier, slower. Komo forgot the people around him. The face of his Sissia faded into the distance. In

him there raged only the fire that the Butas had lit, and he saw nothing but the woman. She appeared to him now like the earth itself, now like a field full of ripe golden rice. His drum called, entreated. Baboeang's dance was over. Slowly the dancer approached. Her feet scarcely left the ground while she moved her body sideways in the direction of the gong-beater and Komo. The wall of the spectators closed in. The tenseness reached its climax. Whom would she choose? The dancer raised her arm as she stood before the two men. For a short moment she glanced at Komo out of the corner of her eye. As if she understood the call of the drum a smile parted her lips, and her hand beckoned Soegardjo into the magic circle.

The audience pressed still closer, till their knees almost touched the backs of the gamelan players. Surprised, questioning faces looked towards Komo, as if they wanted to make sure that it was really he who was to complete the Joget dance. Did the dancer not know about Sissia?

What did the people know of the demons who had Komo in their power? What did they know of the torture of the last few days, of the frenzy which had taken hold of him? The seven figures that Soegardjo was dancing with the woman seemed to him an eternity. At last it was his turn. As if in a trance he put down the drum. Then he was standing in the circle. The gamelan played wilder and wilder, louder and louder. Komo danced. The eyes of the dancer before him were wide open. Her mouth seemed to turn into a wound, and her full body hardly moved. Then something within him gave way. And before he had completed the circle for the second time he caught up the woman into his arms, broke through the wall of the spectators, and disappeared with her into the darkness of the night.

The crowd was speechless for a moment. Then excitement broke loose. Komo, who was about to be married

to Sissia! And he had not even observed the seven prescribed figures of the Joget! No one could explain this strange happening. Only when his brother cautiously said something about the Butas did the crowd become quiet and look anxiously out into the night.

The gamelan went on playing. When it died away there was only the chirping of the cicadas. The oil lamps were extinguished, and there was only the light of the moon. The villagers went back to their huts. Then there was silence.

When the green rice had been planted, Komo and Sissia were married. It

was a pale and silent Sissia who became his wife. But when the wind blew across the ripe rice fields Sissia sang with the other women while working at the harvest. Her eyes shone again as on that day when Komo had told her about the gold earrings.

In the village Komo sat in front of his hut and carved. Under his hands the shapes of his imagination took on forms whose grace and beauty filled the inhabitants of Tedjakoele with astonished admiration. Komo gave magic life to flowers, animals, and figures of gods. But he never carved a woman's head again.

